

## **The Revolution Will Be *Soooo* Cute: YouTube “Hauls” and the Voice of Young Female Consumers**

In the last three years, more than 250,000 short videos known as “hauls” have been posted on YouTube. The ostensible purpose of a haul is to display recent clothing, accessories, and makeup purchases, sometimes simply showing the items and sometimes offering a quick demonstration of how they will be worn; a typical video is under ten minutes long and is filmed with a webcam in the video blogger’s, or *vlogger*’s, bedroom. The *San Francisco Chronicle* describes them as “the favorite medium of expression for attention-seeking shopaholics between the ages of tween and twentysomething” (Wells). Some hauls have more than a million hits, and the 500 or so videos posted by sisters Elle and Blair Fowler have surpassed 160 million combined views (Schwartz). The phenomenon has rated coverage by major outlets such as NPR, *The New York Times*, *Psychology Today*, and *Good Morning America*.

All of this time and attention on the part of teenage girls and young women is channeled into what the *Urban Dictionary* reminds us is simply “a video showing a shopping spree” (Raven L.). Of course there are many variations on the theme, but YouTube video genres develop so quickly that I think we can already speak in terms of the “classic hauls.” The original or core demographic producing hauls consists of mainly middle- and upper-middle class, and mainly white, teens and young women. The products displayed include fairly expensive makeup along with clothing from major brands and mall stores. About ten stores and brands seem to dominate, including

MAC, Forever 21, Sephora, Lush, Ulta, Victoria's Secret, Hollister, American Eagle, Charlotte Russe, and Wet Seal. The uncontested leaders are MAC, which is named in the title of at least 34,000 hauls, and Forever 21, appearing in at least 23,000 titles. A quick taxonomy includes videos with and without a tutorial element; follow-ups on previous hauls; videos responding to "tags" (requests for a haul on a particular topic); hauls from one brand or store; hauls made in response to someone else's haul ("video responses"); and recurring topics such as "Products I Regret Buying," "Back to School Haul," and the especially gratuitous "Bedroom Tour" and "What's In My Purse?" Rarer subsets include hauls displaying products from discount stores, plus-size stores, and wholesale catalogs.

Both in the videos themselves and in the lengthy viewer comment strings beneath, the language that accompanies haul vlogs is an ethnographic goldmine. This discussion explores the rhetorical positioning and conversation topics of the core demographic involved in this phenomenon. Ultimately, I suggest that hauls and their attendant comments provide important information about this segment of contemporary youth culture and its maintenance of longstanding gender tropes even while traversing the new language territory made possible by Web 2.0 forums such as YouTube. Before going further, readers unfamiliar with hauls may want to experience the self-titled "beauty community" for themselves. Clips from several of the hauls discussed in this article are available in a four-minute video on YouTube entitled "How Cute Is That Hauls Sampler?" (Jeffries). Spending just a few minutes in the haulosphere will provide a lasting impression of the rhetoric that constitutes a classic haul. In the transcripts and quotations used in this article, I have retained all the verbal idiosyncracies of speakers and commenters for reasons relevant to my analysis.

If we describe hauls objectively as videos that display and demonstrate new products, identify brands and retailers, and provide a forum for feedback, we might expect something equivalent to an adolescent's *Consumer Reports*. That really would be a nice idea, but it's not a particularly apt analogy since this is not statistically significant data regarding any one product, and the products have not been meaningfully tested. With the exception of the "Products I Regret Buying" tag, hauls are generally filmed immediately after purchase—before we know if this mini-dress will hold its shape or this eyeshadow will flake before second period.

Mail marketing and free samples raise questions about the source of so much expensive merchandise in the hands of teenagers, and recent Federal Trade Commission rulings are relevant to the haulers' activities. According to the 2009 revision of the "FTC Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising," a blogger must "clearly and conspicuously disclose" if a product has been received free of charge from the manufacturer (Federal Trade Commission 79). Indeed, it's quite common to see, in the description box beneath the video, something like jennydeer's note: "Everything was bought by me, I am not being paid, these are my honest opinions." RubyChopsticks confesses, "'This FTC thing confuses me, but i'll just state that i bought everything in this video with my own money and i'm not affiliated with the company. any comments I make are my honest opinion.'" Such disclaimers show awareness, however cloudy, of government oversight, and the girls are anxious to clarify that their haul is not an advertisement. But another motivation seems to be fear of personal accusations such as being mercenary—paid by the company to talk up the merchandise—or the much worse judgment of being spoiled—a rich girl whose parents simply bankrolled the haul.

Negative potential undercurrents are carefully defended against in the hauls. One high school student begins her "Back to School Haul" with this labored protestation:

Hi guys, it's me, Mak, also known as DazzleMak. So today I'm going to do a haul-ish type thing. I don't really want to call it a haul, just because so many people get upset about hauls and bragging. And trust me, I'm not trying to brag: I buy all my clothes by myself; I buy all my makeup by myself. The only time my mom buys my clothes is back-to-school shopping, um, jeans when I really really need them, Christmas, and my birthday. . . . So if you don't like hauls, then *you* don't have to watch this (*smiling*).

Over and again, we see how the vlogger's rhetoric protects her image of transparency and the positive social environment; these are deeply-entrenched social values of the hauling and vlogging community created by young female consumers. Of course negative responses—ranging from jealousy to legitimate judgment—do threaten at the boundaries of every haul, and the etiquette reminder broadcast by DazzleMak is important in this cultural space where what we overwhelmingly find, and what I will

analyze in more detail here, is the familiar smiling face of American “nice girl” culture. Critique is not welcome in this public forum: “So don’t be like, ‘Oh my gosh,’ you know” (DazzleMak).

Adding to the ever-present pressure to be positive within the hauls themselves, the viewer comments framing them develop revealing textual lives of their own that can go on for many months. Since the comment strings involve larger numbers of people, they may give us even more insight, and I would argue that it’s a truly discouraging insight regarding the use these young consumers make of the freedom given by websites like YouTube. These user-generated videos and this largely uncensored forum could be used to regain control of the personal image landscape which has been designed by corporations and imposed through popular media. But the comments deliver disappointingly little more than vapid confirmations of the thinness, big-eyed-ness, cuteness, or general corporate trendiness of the much-revered hauler. In the comment space, which looks most like a series of text messages and IM’s with the expected abbreviations and initialisms, there is very little thoughtful conversation. What I mean is that there is no productive questioning, no broaching of important issues—instead, there are pages and pages of compliments, thank-you’s, and genuinely empty catch-all positives and intensifiers such as the ubiquitous “soooo cute.”

The following example of a viewer comment string displays the frequent use of positive words without much meaning (*cute*, *sweet*, *awesome*, *beautiful*, and *great*) and the tendency to use relatively empty intensifiers (*really*, *very*, and *so*). This one is quite typical in being limited to an exchange of compliments, acknowledgments of those compliments, and occasional queries about where to get the same merchandise or achieve the same look. This is a short string, but many others go on in a similar vein for hundreds of exchanges without introducing any significantly different topics.

**PlasmaSpeedo's "Forever 21 haul- VERY Cheap and cute jewelry!"**

Fashionbug9880: do you like that knuckle ring because I think im getting the same one

PlasmaSpeedo: yeah I love it

ShaneeLovee: Aww I want it all! You really got some great stuff (p.s. -> your very beautiful)

PlasmaSpeedo: very sweet of you to say, thank you :)

mmorrellwi: Love your jewelry. . . . you have great style

PlasmaSpeedo: it's great because it's so cheap! And none of it has tarnished. . . . yet lol

ashleyluvsmoffins: ooohhhh I love that Gold knuckle ring<3 And the heart necklaces

TheBiggybiggy: u r cute

PlasmaSpeedo: u r sweet!

Paaperhearts: I like your owl necklace (:

PlasmaSpeedo: yay! I think it's the one I wear most often

Peachy4Cherry: nice!!

Sstupidssmile: . . . I love all the things you purchased :)

PlasmaSpeedo: I got everything at forever21. com on the website.

The closest forever21 to me is like 2 hours away

Rita273: You are Very Beautiful. Byew

HairloungeNmore: great haul!

PlasmaSpeedo: u r very kind to say so, thank you. :)

wholemilk89: how long did it take to grow your hair out?, Also I love the bow ring. I want it!!!

PlasmaSpeedo: ohh my, i've had hair like this my entire life. I just cut off 10 inches!!! I still can't put it in a braid because it is so short and a braid makes it seem shorter! It makes me freak out, lol YES I don't know which is my fav, the bow or the butterfly :)

Decades of linguistic research into women's language provide insights that correspond with what we find in these hauls. Janet Holmes's 1995 book *Women, Men, and Politeness* observes that compliments exchanged between women are often vehicles to deliver a social judgment or overt "encouragement to continue with the approved behavior" (Holmes 126). Based on the viewer compliments from the main group of hauls, we could conclude that the "approved behavior" includes detailed attention to makeup and hair; maintenance of a body size that can sport the latest fash-

ions; and regular participation in the process of buying new products and putting them (and oneself) on display for public approval.

Holmes offers this general explanation of the subject matter and interpretation of compliments among women:

To be heard as a compliment an utterance must refer to something which is positively valued by the participants and attributed to the addressee. This would seem to permit an infinite range of possible topics for compliments, but in fact the vast majority of compliments refer to just a few broad topics: appearance, ability or performance, possessions, and some aspect of personality or friendliness. (131)

Indeed, the participants in haul-girl culture fifteen years later exchange compliments in just these areas: their natural beauty; their ability to enhance or customize that beauty through cosmetics and trends; their possession of the desired products and clothes (this is a combination of financial ability and selection know-how); and those two ineffable personal qualities, *cuteness* and *sweetness*. Even in this asynchronous forum, the hauler herself often participates in the flow of compliments, conventionally a two-way exchange: when a viewer posts “u r cute,” the hauler promptly replies, “u r sweet!” (PlasmaSpeedo).

Comment strings such as the one displayed above reveal a limited set of values, and the often cruel codes of teen image are reified by this process in which big name merchandise is “hailed in” and commented upon by a few thousand consumers from around the country. The carefully-stated corporate message—look this way or be left out of an important cultural space—is faithfully translated and glossed by unpaid native speakers of the language of teen girls. The merchandise is now *even cuter* than when it left the store and began its journey to some girl’s bedroom, through her webcam, and into the echo-chamber of comments that remind us, quite often, of only this fact. Xxbeechbarbeexx gets right to the point: “This is a cute, cute, cute, cute shirt. Look at that: how cute is that? . . . isn’t that pretty? How awesome is that?”

Nonetheless, in the search for greater self-awareness, broader interests, or resistance to the nice-girl directive, we might look at some “Products I Regret Buying” hauls, a subset where critical or negative ideas would be appropriate. The pressure on young women to seem positive or friendly, no matter what business they are conducting, is humorously revealed by an

analysis of a few of these hauls, described by juicystar07 as “a tag that is going around the beauty community” (“Products I Regret Buying” :02). Most of the “Products I Regret” vlogs open with a statement similar to this one from juicystar07: “So I just want to go ahead and clear things up and just let you know that I’m not trying to talk down on any of the companies or products I mention” (:31). After a reassurance that it’s not about product quality, but about her own purchasing mistakes, the video (which has more than 600,000 views and almost 4,000 comments) goes in quite a different direction. We learn that a Sephora eyeshadow kit was returned because “the pigmentation was just awful” (1:11), and the expensive MAC eye pencils don’t give “good color payoff” compared to the \$3 off-brand options (4:24). E.l.f. brand liquid eyeliner fares much worse. The important information in this product review is that “I opened this, and it smelled so bad that I wanted to cry” (4:53). Though in the next moment, the hauler hedges and softens her dismissal of the product—“Um, I know some people actually really like this product. I don’t know if it’s just mine”—she immediately returns to the negative review with even more detail—“but it smells so bad I *cannot* take it. If I open this up, the stench will fill the room and it will make me want to gag. That’s how bad it smells” (5:12). Even an old standard, Paul Mitchell hair conditioner, gets panned because it “didn’t even make my hair feel soft” (6:09). This goes on for ten minutes and about ten products.

Moniquevanity08’s “Products I Regret” video only had about 375 views and eight comments after a few months online. But this less-popular haul follows all the conventions, including its formulaic opening: “I’m not bashing on these products; they just didn’t work for me” (0:31). Moments after she explains that “you can honestly find, like, a better, like, drugstore foundation” than the punishingly expensive MAC product, and that she “wasted a lot of money on that,” Monique assures us that this review is not about the companies or the products. This nervous vacillation between negative reviews (which must in some cases be legitimate consumer complaints) and assurances of her own positive attitude shows just how much the language of negativity is a feared or uncomfortable part of the young female public identity. These false positives, where the haulers take pains to maintain friendly relations with the corporations, and the FTC disclaimers discussed earlier, which consciously distance the haulers from the companies, are in

fact rhetorically consistent elements of the hauler's personal image. Put together, these pronouncements establish the haul as the genuine (unpaid) experience of a pleasant (unrude) young lady. This is the contorted smile of nice-girl culture through the years—unpaid, unrude—and the inconsistency is not to be a problem.

Linguists Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet explain, in their 2003 study *Language and Gender*, that when women's language implies they are "less than completely committed to the content of what they have said," this is commonly assumed to reduce their social power in that instance (183). But importantly, as the authors assert, contextual factors determine the correct interpretation of any utterance, and there can be varied motivations for using such speech-softening devices. The inconsistency between the introductory rhetoric and the content of so many "Products I Regret Buying" vlogs are not in fact social liabilities in the beauty community, but rather exercises in personality politics, maintaining the requisite sociability and positivity. Here the young women self-consciously distance themselves from what they know will be a brief negative streak, a necessary evil. This is the classic "No offense, but . . ." maneuver that clears a temporary space for a negative remark while carefully protecting the speaker's general sense of self as a nice girl.

Such observations about the hauls comment strings should come as no surprise, as these trends in women's communication have been demonstrated by linguistic analysis for decades. Tannen's well-known 1990 book *You Just Don't Understand* characterizes women's typical speech as an effort to be supportive and to confirm another person's position. This directive comes from social training that begins in childhood. In a 2008 interview, Tannen confirms "how true it still is" all these years later. "Many women," she notes, "are uncomfortable with outright conflict and opposition" and "can be quite competitive about who comes off as the most *cooperative*" (qtd. in Stepp). Years before Tannen, linguist Robin Lakoff's 1975 *Language and Woman's Place* described common features of women's speech such as a veneer of politeness, phrasing statements as questions, hedging, and a general reticence to appear forceful, negative, or even sure of one's own opinion.

Knowing what the rules are, let's see what happens in the far less common case that a hauler approaches the "Products I Regret Buying"



genre with an openly caustic attitude, a little sneer, and no palpable effort to make nice. “Siderasuperstar” forgoes the pretense of being pleasant and happy about wasting money on inferior products or products she can’t use. Her vlog begins, “Hey guys, I’m back again, and I’m doing a video on products I do regret buying and just do not like at all—like, at all. I don’t like them—they are just . . . *uullgh*.” There is no rhetorical softener, and the video doesn’t contain any positive reassurances. The comments generated by more than 54,000 views in a twenty-month period reveal plenty of “haters” and only a few defenders (people we can call the *hater haters*). The 400 comments include many insults about Sidera’s speech and mental ability; there is much less tolerance for poor speech by an openly grouchy girl than for similar habits displayed by ostensibly friendly girls. Comments range from “omg your stupid” to some especially crushing notes like “wow you sound stupid like” and “u shouldn’t make vids com ons u don’t even talk well.” The irony of this comment aside, it may still be the final cut in the web 2.0 world of the teenage girl. This hauler does not follow the known rhetorical and social directives very carefully, and we can tune in to see her virtually ripped to shreds by the pack for these infractions. We’re reminded of the rules when a more sympathetic onlooker takes issue not with the *content* of all the insults but with the way they are *delivered*: “don’t be so mean and calling her dumb . . . cant you just say it nicely?”

Viewer comment strings in response to all types of hauls starkly illuminate the value placed on positivity. After ten months, juicystar07’s “Forever 21 Haul” had accumulated 2,242 comments. A scan of some common words quickly shows the divide between positive and negative language. The most common important word in the string is *love*, as in the comment “i luv all of your hauls.” This word, in its traditional and *texteze* spellings, occurs over 1150 times. The word “cute” is used over 400 times in reference to the hauler, her clothes, and her little dog Teddy, who also appears in the video. The positive adjectives *pretty*, *adorable*, *gorgeous*, *amazing*, *beautiful*, *hot*, and *sexy* combine for a total of 289 uses. By contrast, none of the words *ugly*, *gross*, *hideous*, *nasty*, *yuck*, *yick*, or *disgusting* ever appear in this space. One complex exception to the positive/negative divide in this string is the word *hate*. *Hate* is used only 10% as often as *love*, all in some variant of the phrase “ignore the haters.” These “haters” don’t seem present in the comments themselves, but they are

mentioned by juicystar in various videos as people who've said negative things about her hauls. Juicystar's oblique references to these unseen criticisms allow her to mention the fact that she is not bragging or conceited. After the spectre of the haters has been invoked by the hauler and sent packing by her fans, we are back to the business of piling on positivity.

When we occasionally find a sniper in the comments beneath a popular girl's haul—mentioning the speaker's limited vocabulary, nasal voice, or even her lack of experience with an important make-up brush—those negative remarks are sometimes ignored but usually counter-attacked. A viewer might support her favorite hauler by pointing out that Negative Nelly doesn't have to watch if she doesn't like it. The idea that critique and criticism are legitimate forms of written response doesn't seem to get much support in these comment strings. As noted, the most common block against negativity comes in that patriotic mantra of Haulworld, "never mind the haters." But this is not often necessary, since it's pretty uncommon that a hauler's value is openly criticized. One of the few defenders of the controversial Sidera gets to the bottom of the issue: "rude shut your mouth almost all of you are just jealous of her cause she is prettier than you haters!" Jealousy: it's the only proffered explanation for not loving these beautiful girls with their brand new things.

Positive thinking and seeing the good is part of the American girl's cultural mandate. Barbara Ehrenreich's recent book *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* traces the history of forced American cheeriness and quotes advice for women from a typical dating website:

You should remain positive at all times. You should avoid complaining too much, seeing the negative in things, and allowing this negativity to show. While it is important that you are yourself . . . being negative is never a way to go. (46)

The message is that, for women in particular, too much critical thinking or too much direct engagement with problems will result in rejection and loneliness. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet flatly conclude that high-schoolers' "value as human beings and their relations to others are based on their adherence to gender norms" (26). As we have seen, the haulers (women in training) periodically fail to avoid the dreaded negativity, and social consequences exist for going to that dark side.

Young women know from experience that language choices are social determinants. Years ago Robin Lakoff called attention to some “discourse particles” common in women’s speech including *you know*, *of course*, and *like*. Such insertions “do not contribute much to the content that is conveyed but in various ways solicit sympathetic interpretation and perhaps ultimate support from the listener” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 183). In my transcriptions of the hauls, I convey these weakening particles, though I am aware that many vlog transcriptions would (politely) omit these verbal features and thereby avoid the social implications of leaving them in. The question, indeed, is whether we are “picking on” a female speaker by including her full range of utterances in this way, given what we know about our culture’s common judgment of those very speech patterns. The haulers frequently use *like* and *you know* and even *um* to brace against a potentially impolite or unflattering statement. These habits expose their fear of the consequences of a more straightforward delivery used to describe themselves, their behaviors, and the most of all the things they don’t like. If the hauls culture is ostensibly about talking, sharing, modeling, and even counseling, anything that could create alienation must be introduced and handled gingerly. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet note that “[w]omen’s construction of themselves often gives sociability a central role, whereas appearing self-centered is particularly problematic” (175). As young women, the haulers are already expert at agreeing, supporting, smiling, and beating around the bush. A complex strategy is enacted when one talks about oneself and one’s clothes on camera for ten or more minutes while simultaneously trying to diminish the sense of being self-centered or self-absorbed.

While I am interested in the implications of such discourse particles, hedges, and other speech softeners, I want to distance this analysis from those that assume there is a problem wherever young people employ abbreviated written forms such as “chatspeak.” A few large-scale studies of the linguistic features of adolescent and young adult instant messages and other computer-mediated communications (CMCs) have been published recently. Analyzing one of the largest data sets collected so far, Canadian researchers Sali Tagliamonte and Derek Denis dismiss the common academic handwringing that texting and IM-ing signal the end of literacy. Their 2008 article in the journal *American Speech* argues that IM conversations exhibit a flexible “linguistic fusion” because users are free to “pick and

choose from all the available variants that their linguistic system has to offer.” They go on to argue that young people’s IM language can give us some reason to be hopeful since it “reveals fluid mastery of the sociolinguistic resources in their speech community” (Tagliamonte 27). A more recent study of collected text messages (published in the July 2010 issue of the journal *Reading & Writing*) concludes that teens’ spelling skills are not compromised by their fluency with texting abbreviations and other “new language” forms (Varnhagen *et al*). We should probably accept the idea that young people do still have some control over the language, and maybe adults are too concerned that their communication choices indicate an inability to differentiate among the written registers.

But this academic’s foray into the world of YouTube hauls suggests that, when teen girls are given free reign in an adult-less language environment, it’s not the spelling and vocabulary that should worry us, but rather the number of ideas, topics, and social possibilities that get any air time. The comment strings reveal not the free speech community we hope would result from our American girls’ new vistas, but a limited speech community hemmed in and delimited by the same old gender-based social fears. In video after video, haulers fail to deliver substantial ideas, show little awareness of global issues and corporate behavior, and glibly extricate themselves from tricky questions about endorsement. On the other hand, nothing is too trivial for extensive coverage by the voices of “the beauty community.” Pinkcupcake211’s “Mac To The Beach Haul” goes on and on:

And, this is what the box looks like. It’s like a really nice glossy, olive green. And the eyeshadow itself is also like a really nice olive green. And I really like the fact that they made it really shiny—um, the normal MAC packaging is just kind of bland and . . . not glossy, so that was really cute. And how cute is that? It has a little seashell on the front: that looks so cute and summery. . . . so I thought this would be really cute to wear with like light pinks and um maybe peaches, so it’s really cute.

These vlogs provide so many hours of virtually unreflective talk about subjects like how to straighten hair (never wondering why straight hair has such value); how to predict which jeans pockets will make the butt look smaller (demonstrated by a person who weighs about 100 pounds); and how to color in the perfect “smoky eye” (for a day in the ninth grade). PlasmaSpeedo begins one of her thirty-three similar videos about her clothes,

her nail polish, and her cheap-but-cute jewelry with this terribly ironic announcement: “I’m just going to jump right into it because I hate when people babble” (0:07).

But still hoping and searching in good faith, I clicked on one more haul, this one about the charitable company TOMS Shoes, thinking I had found a “haul for a good cause.” In addition to admiring the free gift that comes with the shoes—“it looks really cute”—and the shoes themselves—“they’re so cute”—this hauler tells us that the company donates shoes to children “like in Africa or somewhere over there” (1:29). The shoes, she proclaims, have “a really cute message” (1:45). Of course we can accept all this verbal cutenanny in the service of a good cause like TOMS, but we’re abruptly brought back to Haulworld reality when she admits it’s “kind of a bummer” that TOMS are now available at Macy’s, since she wanted to be one of the only people in her area to have the shoes. The screen name for this vlogger is “moniquevanity08.” So much for helping the cause and changing the world one pair of shoes at a time.

### Other Groups and Conclusions

With more than a quarter of a million hauls posted so far, the samples and trends I have explored here cannot be entirely representative. The social group that is the focus of this discussion forms the core of a trend which exists on a smaller scale in other populations. These other groups, doubtless, reflect and maintain their own values through this medium, and further analysis should consider the differences among hauls posted by varied social and ethnic groups. I’ll briefly take a look at three subsets here to give an idea of the range of issues and priorities they present.

Bargain or discount store hauls provide one example of the distinctions among hauls posted by different groups of consumers. A search for hauls with the terms *bargain*, *cheap*, or *dollar* (Dollar Tree, Family Dollar, Dollar Store) in the title reveals about 10,000 videos, or less than 5% of the hauls to date. These generally shorter videos feature products from stores such as Ross, Dollar Tree, and Kmart and seem to make up the majority of the hauls posted by African-Americans. In a general comparison to the classic hauler profile discussed here, the bargain store hauler is less chatty and solicitous of the audience’s feedback, less practiced at speaking and

presenting, and also less concerned with dress and makeup at the time of filming. Sometimes the products aren't shown clearly or the hauler is sitting so close that part of her head is cut off by the webcam. She often still wears the sweats in which she made the Dollar Store run, not concerned with putting on all the new goods before filming the haul. These casual vlogs receive far fewer views and comments, if any comments at all, and the rhetorical issues observed throughout this discussion are not a noticeable feature (with the exception of the overuse of the word "cute," which seems to impact all groups). A second interesting subset features Asian-American teens and young women; undeniably, these videos compete with the classic hauls in their focus on new clothes and major brands. They feature some of the most prepared, carefully manicured, and well-spoken contributors. Two features set them apart most clearly: the choice to identify a cultural group in the title (the word Asian occurs in the title of about 1% or 3,000 of the hauls currently online); and the presence of conversations about important cultural issues many Asians and Asian-American girls face, such as skin tone and skin lightening. Comment strings frequently include compliments about the whiteness of a girl's skin and the exchange of information about lightening products. Occasionally there is a disagreement about the origins of and rationale for continuing this practice. In this sense, these self-titled "Asian" hauls start some potentially productive work; unfortunately, my observations of the debate thus far only find exchanges of opinions and myths that don't go anywhere. The hauls viewer comments—and perhaps this is true of almost all YouTube comment strings—just don't lend themselves to the type of responsive and responsible dialogue that advances a community's understanding. Instead, voices fire at random and rarely come back to explain themselves. We must also remember that, while skin-lightening is an enormously important identity matter which reaches into the impact of colonialism and class divisions over hundreds of years, these young haulers are primarily interested in the topic as it pertains to makeup purchases and application tips.

Finally, the smallest subset of haulers I will mention here consists of girls and young women over size twelve. Fewer than 2,500 haul titles, or less than 1%, contain the words *plus size* or the name of a plus-size retailer (stores such as Lane Bryant, Torrid, and Avenue). In 2009, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the average American woman was a size fourteen and also observed that "plus-size clothing is largely relegated to the Internet,

where customers who already have a complicated relationship with clothes are unable to see, touch or try on merchandise” (Vesilind). Given this reality, hauls could be a meaningful corrective to the lack of available information, but this population of women doesn’t participate in the hauls phenomenon at a rate anywhere near their actual numbers. The language strategies and conversations of the very few who do choose to speak in this forum would be worth examining.

Such disparities between the true diversity of young American women and the limited array represented through hauls is a painful reminder of what we already knew about the values sustained by popular media and its consumer champions: expensive, light-skinned, and thin. Even when the mechanism is in the control of the population itself—after all, YouTube’s slogan is “Broadcast Yourself”—old cultural pressures, paradigms of beauty and importance, and class divisions continue to direct and limit our conversation. Instead of using technology and the new speech forums to resist the corporate culture machine, the powerful consumer group constituted by young American women exhibits a lamentable lack of activism.

Douglass Rushkoff’s 2001 documentary *The Merchants of Cool* describes a “giant feedback loop” in which corporations manipulate young consumers into selling an image to themselves. These “hauls” are the latest manifestation of that automated marketing process in which consumers spread the corporation’s message but feel they’re somehow steering the market themselves. Numerous haul gurus like meganheartsmakeup and dulceandcandy87 have their own YouTube channels with hundreds of thousands of subscribers, all engaged in this conversation about clothes and makeup. Going beyond YouTube’s consumer incubator, there is recent news that Blair Fowler, the 17-year-old hauler we’ve known as juicystar07, and her older sister Elle, have signed a contract for a reality show on the corporate motherhood of contemporary American teen culture, MTV (Schwartz). How cute is that?

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